

In 1979, aboard an airplane somewhere over the Rocky Mountains, I happened to be reading a J.B. Phillips translation of the book of Revelation, and I was stopped by one of the opening verses: “Anyone who hears this book read aloud will receive a special blessing.” There was great charm in this sentence for me. The charm proceeded, in part, from the fact that I make my living “reading aloud”. So, as the plane glided on toward California, I made a mental note to remember this verse. It did, after all, seem to contain a written guarantee for something unguaranteeable--a positive audience response. Considering the source, I did not think that this promise should be taken lightly.

In October of 1984, when the occasion came for me to read aloud, for public performance at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C., the vision that John had of the end of the world, I had an image of the famed radio reporter covering the ill-fated landing of the Hindenburg. The young man was sent to herald the successful landing of the dirigible as a stirring account of just one more technical advancement in the 20th century. Instead, he was weeping, sobbing, and screaming into the microphone as he witnessed the catastrophe explode before his eyes. His report was recorded for public sale, and the whole terrible event later inspired a novel and feature film.

My parents had a copy of that radio recording, and it fascinated and terrified me to listen to it. I was glad someone was there to tell me what happened, but I was even more grateful that it was not I. This is, on a very small scale, what I feel toward St. John and his book. As an actor, I will have to see what John saw. But, if these 22 chapters at the end of the scripture offer an accurate account of what our destiny will be, then I want to know it. Most importantly, if there are survivors, I want to hear all about it.

Perhaps we will receive a “special blessing” upon hearing this book spoken aloud, or, as the New English Version puts it, “we will be happy.” We can listen with more courage in the company of a gathered audience to news that both terrifies and elates. John had the benefit of being “caught up with the spirit” before he saw the new heavens and earth. As the next hour or so unfolds, that very thing could happen to us. In this room there is more gathered than just so many pumping hearts, heaving lungs, and sweating palms. There are spirits, personalities, and souls here, things created to live forever. Sitting next to each other in a darkened theater is not unlike holding hands and peeking past the fence of our experience to what is next. For this occasion, we need one another.

If my intent was to add to the theological stacks of the library one more interpretation of Revelation, then anyone could certainly grapple with my single opinion on a private basis. Little courage is needed to look at one man’s thoughts. It would be enough in such a case to read the book, analyze it perhaps in a classroom or lecture setting, perhaps receive a grade and most likely to forget it. However, what courage is needed to see what John saw? What equipment does one need to be “caught up with the spirit” and read ahead to the last chapter of the human race? I think we need more than just a copy of the New Testament and several hours of time on our hands, and I think we need more than just the best concordances and study guides. I think we need to follow the instructions in the “script,” and hear it “read aloud.” After all, why should St. John be the only one of us to have been transported?

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